

Title of Project:

Examining Synchronous Hybrid English Learning for Children in Rural China: A Hybrid Ethnographic Study

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

China is a country with huge gaps between rural and urban education. It is much more difficult for students in rural areas to get access to good schools and qualified teachers than it is for those students living in the cities. Many rural schools, especially those in western China, lack well-trained teachers and adequate curricula for both economic and geographic reasons. English education, in particular, has the widest rural-urban divide. Besides limited access to quality English education, many rural students also lack learning support at home. Millions of rural Chinese children are being raised by grandparents because their parents migrated to work in suburban factories in order to feed the families back in the villages. These children are so called “left-behind” children in China.

In order to provide better curricula for children in rural areas, Chinese educational non-profit organizations have recently started to develop hybrid learning programs that can be disseminated to schools in remote areas. This study is an examination of one of the leading supplementary hybrid learning programs provided by a non-profit organization (NPO) for primary schools in remote Chinese villages. Specifically, I investigated English hybrid classes in a rural, ethnic primary school in western China. The hybrid class adopted a dual-teacher model, in which an English instructor participated synchronously online and a local teacher assisted in organizing the physical classroom. The synchronous hybrid classes used Zhumu (瞩目) as the online videoconferencing tool.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What patterns of interaction do teachers and students employ in hybrid English classes in a remote Chinese village school?
2. What are the students’ and teachers’ perspectives on their experiences with supplementary hybrid English instruction?

Research Methodology

I employed hybrid ethnography (Przybylski, 2020) as the methodology in this study. Ethnographic educational research emphasizes learning as a social and cultural process (Bloome, 2012).

Participants. There were 19 students in the fifth grade. The online English teacher was a full-time English teacher in Shanghai and had been voluntarily teaching English online for the students for one and a half years at the time of the study. The local facilitating teacher was the fifth-grade Math teacher.

Data Collection. The data collected included online and onsite observations, fieldnotes, interviews with the teachers and the students, the participants' group chat records, as well as students' written assignments and textbook notes.

Data Analysis. The data analysis consisted of three stages. During the first stage, I did quantitative and qualitative analysis of the interactions from the observation data. The quantitative analysis was used to typologize the interactions, while the qualitative ethnographic reconstructive analysis was used to uncover the meanings, discourse features, and norms of the interactions. The second stage was devoted to thematic analysis of the interview data. During the third stage, I connected the interview and observation data, using the coding scheme created during stage two. I also triangulated with the students' written work and online chats. Member checks and peer debriefing were used to assuring the credibility of the research.

Summary of Findings

RQ1: What patterns of interaction do teachers and students employ in hybrid English classes in a remote Chinese village school?

The four patterns employed in the hybrid English class were the following: (a) online interactions between the online teacher and the students, (b) online interactions between the online teacher and the classroom teacher, (c) face-to-face (FTF) interactions between the classroom teacher and the students, and (d) FTF interactions among the students themselves. The configuration of the two teachers and the students all interacting altogether was absent from this study due to the backstage role of the classroom teacher.

The findings showed that hybrid learning provided opportunities for the online instructor and the young learners to participate in various forms of online and FTF discussions and learning. Echoing previous research, this study also found that synchronous instruction promotes young students' motivation and confidence in language learning because of its real-time communications that simulate FTF language communications (Austin et al., 2017). As a unique feature of this hybrid class serving rural Chinese students, the nonratified FTF interactions, which were enabled by the hybrid class, gave them impetus to their active participation and motivation to speak English.

RQ2: What are the students' and teachers' perspectives on their experiences with supplementary hybrid English instruction?

The findings of the students' perceptions and experiences suggested the potential for synchronous hybrid English instruction to open new opportunities for rural Chinese elementary school students' English language development. The students used the affordances of hybrid instruction to form a learning community and use their L1 to help with their language learning. Both teachers agreed on several challenges of providing hybrid instruction to rural students, i.e., the lack of home support, the rural students' learning attitudes, and the divergence between rural school culture and the online teacher's beliefs.



Implications

The study provided practical implications for hybrid language teaching, language instruction for rural Chinese EFL students, rural school administration, the NPO, and educational policies.

It is important to acknowledge that hybrid instruction could provide a variety of affordances that allow young EFL learners to engage in active language learning. However, teachers need to consider fostering young learners' self-regulation skills when teaching in this format. As to nonlocal online teachers who do not have experience teaching rural students, it is expected that the results of this study will contribute to helping teachers recognize the importance of understanding students' backgrounds, learning attitudes, and behaviors. It is also important for the rural school administration and the NPO to consider ways to promote the collaboration, so that the local teachers can benefit professionally from working with the online teacher together. The local classroom teachers should take a more active role in sharing information, planning lessons, facilitating classroom activities, and jointly solving problems, rather than only taking a backstage role in the hybrid class. The government and educational policies should also provide sustainable support for rural schools and not overemphasize the impacts of technological access on rural education.

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